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PHONETICS IN THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR

By ARTHUR GIBBON BOVÉE

MUCH has been said advocating the use of phonetics in the study of French because of its effectiveness in aiding the student to acquire a good pronunciation. The moment therefore seems opportune to consider some other values of the study of phonetics, apart from the question of pronunciation. It is perfectly patent from the foregoing statement that the caption of this article, i e., "Phonetics in the Teaching of Grammar" is somewhat inadequate since it is not sufficiently comprehensive. Its real thesis is that, aside from all question of pronunciation, the study of phonetics is an effective and logical introduction to the study of the French language. The arguments in support of this thesis fall very naturally into two divisions. First, the value of phonetics in minimizing the difficulties of French orthography; second, the value of phonetics in solving some of the problems of grammar and form changes.

As the term phonetics will recur with inevitable frequency in the course of this discussion, it might be well to have a clear understanding of its meaning. For the purposes of this paper, phonetics may be defined as systematic study of sounds, their production, their relations, and written values. Clearly, phonetics does not mean the use of phonetic script. Furthermore, it may clarify our discussion if we have before us at the outset a summary of elementary phonetic principles that the student should know. Here is, then, an enumeration of the phonetic minimal essentials.

1. The difference between a vowel and a consonant.
2. The sixteen vowel sounds and their usual spellings: eight normal sounds, four abnormal sounds, four nasal sounds.
3. Consonants.
 - a. Voiced and voiceless differentiated.
 - b. Their usual spellings.
4. Phonetic syllabication.
5. Open and closed syllables:

An open syllable is *one that ends in a vowel sound*: a closed syllable is *one that ends in a consonant sound*.

6. Tonic, secondary tonic, and atonic syllable.
The last pronounced syllable is the tonic syllable.
7. An understanding of the mute "e."
8. A mute "e" can never remain so in a tonic syllable.
9. The vowel, consonant, mute "e" principle.
10. Stress groups.
11. Linking.
12. Assimilation.
13. The usual sound of the letter "é" is never used in a closed syllable.

If the student has a practical working knowledge of these facts and principles, he may be considered as phonetically trained for the purposes of this discussion.

As regards the value of phonetics in learning orthography, I have satisfied myself absolutely that careful phonetic training will reduce spelling difficulties to the point of elimination, for the ear of children of the average age of fourteen retains the memory of a sound more easily and accurately than the eye retains the image of the written word. Instead of remembering from eight to ten letters, the student has only to remember three or four sounds, e. g., *beaucoup*, *vigoureux*. The sound remembered by the ear is readily translated into its written form through the association of the sound and its usual spelling. In a word, by closely linking the sound with its usual written value, students may be taught to spell from sound. With the spelling difficulty definitely eliminated, the mind is free to concentrate on the learning of the meaning. The inevitable result is speed in the acquisition of vocabulary coupled with unusual accuracy in spelling. These statements received timely confirmation but yesterday, when a young lad of twelve in a seventh grade class heard "nous mangeons" for the first time. At my request he went to the board and wrote it. It was delightful to see the little chap methodically place an "e" after the "g." To him there was no problem. No rule was necessary. The sound was quite sufficient. I am sure that my little pupil would have done equally well with *je mangeais*, *nous plaçons*, *je plaçais*, *longue*, and many others. The phonetically trained pupil handles the spelling of words of this type as a matter of course. These are definite dividends derived from a phonetic introduction. The spelling difficulty is reduced to a

minimum. The noise of the machinery of the letters is hushed. The mind is free to concentrate on the content.

As I have stated above, the second part of the discussion has to do with grammar. Since some grammar principles and many form changes are governed by phonetic laws, a knowledge of these laws will obviously minimize the difficulty by offering a practical and rational explanation. Furthermore, our procedure will be thoroughly in accordance with the historical development of the language. In the first place, if the student has a working knowledge of the phonetic law that the usual sound of "é" is never found in a closed syllable, that is, a syllable ending in a consonant sound, it will practically relieve his mind of the task of remembering when to use an acute or a grave accent. If the student encounters such words as *chèque*, *siège*, *mère*, there is no difficulty at all. He knows that a mute "e" (see phonetic minimal essentials), cannot remain in a tonic syllable, therefore, the use of the accent is suggested. He sees that these syllables end in consonant sounds and that they are consequently closed syllables. Since the syllable is closed, it excludes the use of the acute accent, and by contrast suggests the grave accent.

In the second place, this same law will explain the change from the acute accent in *espérer* and *répéter* to the grave accent in *j'espère* and *je répète*. In the infinitive forms, the syllables are open, i. e., they end in vowel sounds, while in the first person of the present they are closed. The student knows also that there is no change of accent in the future, *je répéterai*, for the simple reason that the syllables *ré* and *pé* are open since they end in a vowel sound. It is not necessary to repeat the rule for one to see that the sound changes found in *j'ai* to *ai-je*, *je sais*, *sais-je*, *j'irai*, *irai-je* fall in line with it. There are however two exceptional cases worthy of note. They are *événement* and the interrogative, *donné-je*. The orthography is exceptional, but the pronunciation is quite regular.

Another practical law which will help to explain many form changes is the following: "a mute "e" may never remain in a tonic syllable." In its application to pronouns, the law explains why we say "il me donne," but "donnez-moi." In the first case, *me* is atonic, i. e., not stressed, in the second, *moi* is tonic. American students often write *donnez-moi-en* instead of *donnez-*

m'en. They would surely be less likely to fall into this error if they understood clearly that *moi* was used only in tonic syllables. In the incorrect example, *moi* is in an atonic syllable. In this connection, the student must be made to understand that we are not dealing with a grammar law, but with a phonetic law. By a similar process, *que, te, se*, give *quoi, toi, soi*. However, in *dites-le*, the spelling does not change, but the sound value of the "e" becomes that of "eu," and Paul Passy approves either of the two sound values for "eu," [ø] or [œ].

The mute "e" law is equally applicable to the solution of irregular adjective forms. In such cases as "complet" and "dernier," if the student follows the regular rule of adding "e" to form the feminine, he will find a mute "e" in the tonic syllable. To obviate this difficulty, it is no trick at all to add the grave accent, especially as the syllable is a closed one. In "ancien" and "cruel," he meets an analogous situation, only he must employ a different means to get the mute "e" out of a tonic syllable, namely that of doubling the consonant. The phonetically trained student is however forewarned, which is the greater part of the battle.

Finally, not only does this principle operate to explain pronoun and adjective changes but also to explain changes in verb forms. In "nous nous levons," the "e" has no accent because it is not in tonic syllable. But in "je me lève," an accent is required, otherwise a mute "e" would remain in tonic syllable, a situation which must be avoided. Similarly we can explain form changes in such verbs as *acheter, appeler, jeter*, present, future, and past future. The change noted in *vous devez* and *ils doivent*, "e" to "oi," is but another expression of the operation of this basic principle. The obvious value of this method of procedure is that it ties up to one principle a mass of apparently unrelated phenomena which promotes both system and simplicity.

Let us observe still another situation where a phonetic law will tend to efface the difficulty. If the student is made to feel that in French there is a consistent tendency to start a syllable with a consonant, whenever possible, he will be admirably well equipped to cope with the following difficulties.

1. Un bel arbre
2. Le nouvel an

3. Cet ami (m)
4. Mon école (f)
5. Son attention (f)
6. Un dernier effort

In some of these examples, the phonetic law supersedes the grammatical law. Moreover, a knowledge of the phenomenon of vocalization will help the student to understand the following.

1. *Actif* becomes *active* in the feminine
2. *Veuf* becomes *veuve* in the feminine.

What really happens is this. The vibration of the vocal chords for "i", carried through to "e" at a period when this letter had a sound value, causes the "f" to become voiced. This is really an assimilation that shows up in orthography as well as in pronunciation. In this case, as in many others we ordinarily consider it an irregularity or treat it as such. In reality, it is a phonetic or natural law, and not a grammatical or conventional law. In "neuf" and "neuf heures" an analogous situation presents itself, though the sound has not affected the orthography.

Now let us note an additional value of a knowledge of the difference between tonic and atonic syllables. Observe the four verbs *mourir*, *pouvoir*, *vouloir*, *mouvoir*. In the present tense we find *je meurs*, *je peux*, *je veux*, *je meus*. Evidently "ou" becomes the sound represented by "eu" in the tonic syllable. Once again the phonetically trained student is alive to the situation and will rarely fail to make the proper change in the form. A similar situation presents itself in the subjunctive of the four irregular verbs *aller*, *valoir*, *falloir*, *vouloir*, each of which contains an "l." The atonic forms are *nous allions*, *nous valions*, *nous voulions*, while the tonic forms are *il aille*, *il vaille*, *il faille*, *il veuille*. The difficulty is partly overcome by the comprehension of the meaning of tonic and atonic syllable.

I cannot resist the temptation to call attention to one point in pronunciation which the open and closed syllable law will help the student to decide: when to use the sound of "eu" as in *deux* or when to use the sound of "eu" as in *neuf*. The answer is simple. In general "eu" as in *deux* is found in an open syllable, i. e., one ending in a vowel sound, for example, *peu*, *vieux*, *jeudi*, *meunier*. The ending "*euse*" is of course an exception. On the other side, the sound of "eu" as in *neuf* is generally found in a closed syllable,

for example, *seul*, *fleuve*, *boeuf*, *oeuf*. In *des boeufs* and *des oeufs*, the syllable becomes open so the sound of "eu" changes to that of "eu" in "deux." *Neuf* [nœf] and *neuf* [nø] *livres* may be explained on the same basis.

In conclusion, I shall cite one last phonetic law, which, though not quite as definite as the others, will nevertheless prove very helpful in supplying at least a thread of logical connection where apparently everything is irregular. If the student is taught that in the development of the French language, it became a habit to pronounce the sound of "l" before a consonant negligently, so much so that the tongue failed to make the contact with the front of the mouth, just as is done in English in *walk* and *talk*, and that a sound was produced which was represented by the letter "u", we have established a relation between "l" and "u" before a consonant that will throw considerable light on the following forms, which the grammars generally list as exceptions without giving any explanation.

1. Irregular plurals:

<i>un cheval</i>	<i>des chevaux</i>
<i>un oeil</i>	<i>des yeux</i>
<i>un aieul</i>	<i>des aieux</i>

2. Irregular feminines of adjectives:

<i>beau</i>	<i>belle</i>
<i>nouveau</i>	<i>nouvelle</i>
<i>vieux</i>	<i>vieille</i>
<i>fou</i>	<i>folle</i>
<i>mou</i>	<i>molle</i>

3. Contraction of articles:

<i>de le</i>	<i>du</i>
<i>à le</i>	<i>au</i>

4. Irregular verbs:

<i>falloir, il faut, il faudra</i>
<i>valoir, il vaut, il vaudra</i>
<i>vouloir, je veux, je voudrai</i>

Once again by the use of a phonetic law we link together a mass of apparently irregular forms. We can at least present to the student a reasonable explanation of the changes. This is effective because it brings order out of chaos.

Some may object that it takes too long to inculcate these principles. My answer is that the phonetically trained pupil is like a skilled workman who brings to his task not only sharp tools, but also an understanding of them and a knowledge of how to use them to the best advantage. Obviously he can work with greater speed and efficiency. Furthermore, his satisfaction and profit are enhanced by the appeal to the reason as well as to the memory.¹

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